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RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS IMMEDIATE 3709  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000646

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: EUR/ACE COORDINATOR DISCUSSES ASSISTANCE NEEDS  
WITH BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador George A. Krol for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On June 5, an EUR/ACE and USAID delegation led by Ambassador Thomas Adams met with representatives of Belarusian opposition non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, and independent news media. Belarus' two main independent opinion pollsters also briefed the delegation. The NGO, political party, and media representatives generally characterized the opposition campaign during March's presidential elections as successful but said that pro-democracy forces faced enormous obstacles, including economic conditions favorable to the Lukashenko regime, inadequate financial support, a marginalized independent mass media, an overly centralized opposition coalition, and a repressive and well financed incumbent. Moreover, they offered three recommendations for future opposition campaigns, including the promotion of independent mass media, aid to activists repressed by the regime, and increased international assistance to opposition organizations. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Accompanied by George Frowick, EUR/ACE Division Chief for FSA, Sally Kux, EUR/ACE Division Chief for Democracy and Governance, and Susan Fertig-Dykes, USAID Team Leader for Democracy and Governance, the Coordinator for U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia Ambassador Thomas Adams met with a wide variety of representatives of Belarusian opposition forces.

-- Civil Society Leaders: Ales Belyatski from "Vyasna"; Aleksandr Opeikin from Third Way; Lyudmila Petina from the Women's Independent Democratic Movement; Alena Volynets from the Assembly of Democratic NGOs; Tatyana Protko of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee; Olga Karach from "Nash Dom"; and independent opinion pollsters, Oleg Manaev and Andrey Vardomatsky.

-- Opposition Coalition Leaders: Sergey Kalyakin, Chairman of the Belarusian Party of Communists; Lyudmila Gryaznova, Deputy Chair of the United Civic Party; and Inna Kulei, wife of opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich.

-- Independent Journalists: Andrey Batunets of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ); Vyacheslav Khodosovsky of "Belarus I Rynok"; Ales Lipsky of Belapan; Viktor Martinovich of Belgazeta; Svetlana Kalinkova of "Narodaya Volya"; Andrey Vashkevich of "Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta" (BDG); and Aleksandra Dynko of "Nasha Niva."

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Evaluation of Opposition Presidential Campaign  
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¶3. (C) In the course of the meetings between the ACE-USAID delegation and the NGO, political party, and media representatives, a virtual consensus emerged with respect to the successes of and obstacles to the opposition campaign during the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus.

Successes  
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¶4. (C) The NGO and political party representatives generally described the opposition campaign as successful. For example, Belyatski said that, despite a lot of finger pointing regarding the election, the opposition election campaign was effective and noted two positive developments: first, the political opposition formed a single, united coalition; and second, NGOs were able to coordinate closely with political parties. Volynets noted that she and the members of her organization were encouraged by the unity displayed by the opposition in their support of Aleksandr Milinkevich and the creation of the "Za Svobodu" (For Freedom) movement. Furthermore, Gryazova described the current situation for the opposition as better now than after the 2001 election and argued that polls cannot be used as the sole gauge of what is happening in Belarus.

Obstacles  
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¶5. (C) When Ambassador Adams asked why the opposition campaign had not been more successful, the NGO and political

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party representatives generally agreed that the opposition faced at least five nearly insurmountable obstacles in the run up to the elections.

-- Stable Economy. Most concurred that the relatively stable economic conditions in Belarus during the campaign were favorable to the Lukashenko campaign. Belyatski noted that the electorate was very reticent to change governments when the government is doing well. Manaev pointed out that many Belarusians genuinely support Lukashenko and said there is a strong correlation between the current improvement in people's economic situation and their support for the status quo.

-- Marginalized Independent Media. All speakers, without exception, agreed that the lack of independent mass media in Belarus severely limited the opposition's ability to respond to the regime's propaganda and to coordinate demonstrations. However, they diverged with respect to the underlying causes. Whereas some speakers focused on the government's closure of papers and pressure on newspaper distributors, others described the lack of professionalism among Belarusian journalists. Still others criticized international assistance to independent media.

-- Inadequate Resources. There was almost unanimity among the speakers that opposition forces lacked sufficient material support from the international community. Belyatski even claimed that one week before the election the opposition had exhausted its resources. However, Manaev criticized the Belarusian opposition and most foreign donors for believing that short-term efforts aimed at immediate regime change would be effective.

-- Organizational Challenges in the Opposition Coalition. Although all speakers recognized the need for more opposition unity, most expressed dissatisfaction with how the opposition forces had coalesced. Karach in particular disagreed with the opposition's strategy of unifying behind a single national opposition leader on the grounds that the opposition

was rendered leaderless and impotent after the regime arrested the opposition's top leaders.

-- Media Savvy Regime. The NGO, political party, and media representatives uniformly identified the regime itself as their most formidable obstacle. Although Belyatski and others stressed that Lukashenko's regime is still very Soviet in mentality, one should not expect the government to react as clumsily as the Soviet state. Lukashenko continues to enjoy strong public support in large part because state media takes advantage of every medium to tout the successes of the regime.

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What to Do Next?  
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¶6. (C) Opposition and civil society leaders uniformly informed Ambassador Adams that foreign assistance to the Belarusian opposition and civil society needs to be significantly augmented in the post election period. They recommended additional resources be devoted to further developing independent media, broadening the leadership base of the opposition, and implementing direct assistance to repressed activists.

Bolster Independent Media  
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¶7. (C) All emphasized the importance of promoting the development of an independent mass media in Belarus that can counter the regime's propaganda. Petina argued that the promotion of an independent mass media in Belarus is critical since more access to independent news would enable women, whom she described as the "most conservative" segment in Belarusian society, to draw the connection between political change and women's economic empowerment. Others emphasized more material support for print publications inside Belarus.

¶8. (C) Pollsters Manaev and Vardomatsky suggested more funds be allocated to developing independent television, possibly broadcast via satellite. Manaev claimed that 45 percent of

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the population has access to satellite channels either directly through their own satellite dish or indirectly through hundreds of very small cable companies. He added that it would be hard for the GOB to shut down this access, as it is too decentralized and too many people make money by providing these cable services. Vardomatsky also suggested working with EuroNews, which is very influential for Belarusian youth.

Deepen and Broaden Opposition Leadership  
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¶9. (C) Most speakers agreed that the opposition must simultaneously unify and enlarge its leadership, making a more "horizontal coalition." Some stressed that the opposition needs more regional programs. When Ambassador Adams asked about encouraging more youth activism, Gryaznova expressed strong opposition to unifying the opposition youth movement and said that the youth groups should compete with each other to encourage success.

Ramp Up Assistance to Repressed Activists  
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¶10. (C) The groups agreed that the international community should provide more assistance to Belarusians who have been fired from their jobs or expelled from school because of their opposition activism. However, the political parties tended to define such assistance to include salaries. Responding to Ambassador Adams, Kalyakin noted that the regime prevents opposition leaders from being employed and that most activists could not afford to work pro bono.

Gryaznova and Kulei said that they supported deepening the opposition's "back bench" but agreed with Kalyakin that this would be difficult without remuneration.

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